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October 1983: Jazz trumpet player Miles Davis in Paris. The screen biography of his life opens April 15. JOEL ROBINE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

MILES DAVIS BIOPIC PLAYS IT COOL

How do you accurately depict the way personality figures in the creation of the most ephemeral art form?

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Jazz and the movies have been joined at the hip for nearly a century. (Start with Al Jolson's hideous 1927 blackface turn in The Jazz Singer, the first sound feature film.) Even today, when jazz is but a tiny minority interest, the music enhances filmic mood, impressionism, kinetic action, and "the sound of surprise," as the great New Yorker critic Whitney Balliett described it.

Imagine Bullitt, the Steve McQueen thriller, without Lalo Schifrin's pulsating score. Imagine virtually any recent Woody Allen film without the poignancy of old-timey jazz recordings. Imagine a number of Spike Lee's joints (Mo' Better Blues) without the jazz verging on hip-hop trumpet of Terence Blanchard, or Alfie, the 1966 British mod drama, without Sonny Rollins's poignant themes (landing on the pop charts, rare for jazz).

Film biographies of jazz musicians and their netherworld are a different matter. How do you visually show the measure of inspiration and skill required for the level of improvisation that sets jazz apart from other music? How do you accurately depict how personality figures in the creation of the most ephemeral art form?

"All too often, 'jazz' at the movies is shorthand for a sordid, sensational and self-destructive lifestyle," wrote the great film critic David Thomson. "Now, the collective history of jazz musicians does support such a view. But sometimes, as you come out of The Man With the Golden Arm" — starring Frank Sinatra as a jazz junkie — "vibrating with that insistent score by Elmer Bernstein that is jazz-like without ever catching the air of jazz, you wish that the film's scrappy hero, Frankie Machine, was not a would-be jazz drummer, but a guy longing to be second oboe with the Chicago Symphony."

Miles Ahead, the screen biography of Miles Davis, the chameleon of jazz, delves into the extraordinarily complex personality of the music's biggest star, who died in 1991 at 65. Timed for the trumpet titan's 90th anniversary, the film opens April 15.

The film starts with Davis in 1979, lying around his house in a druggie funk. Director and star Don Cheadle said in a Billboard profile that he wanted to "externalize the process that an artist like Miles Davis might go through when he hits writer's block." That creative process, said Cheadle, can be "inherently undramatic" — thus the beginning is at least titillating to those unaware of the jazz/drug lifestyle.

"All the other stuff that goes into what you create — racism, record-label conflicts, people stealing your ideas — ultimately, those are the interesting things to me." He forgot to mention the most important aspect: mastery of the ideas and emotions rife in music.

Thus the film depends on simple iconography to explain away an extremely complex personality. Miles the fashion plate, Miles the diffident competitor, Miles the outspoken paragon of blackness, Miles the innovator.

Hapless deconstruction in many jazz films often bypasses the musicians' key ingredient: a personality that drives the narrative. This is why Round Midnight, the 1986 award-winning French-American production directed by Bertrand Tavernier, is probably the most moving of jazz films.

West Coast pioneer Dexter Gordon played the proverbial veteran expatriate jazzman in Paris who gains recognition (thanks to a fanatical fan), but still longs for home turf in New York. In other words, Gordon is playing himself, and his solos — as rough hewn but beautiful as his voice — give the film its grit.

In the 1950s, the movies reflected the influence of hipsters and beatniks and other jazz-loving "nonconformists." Marlon Brando's seminal 1953 The Wild One relied on jazz by West Coast leader Shorty Rogers and The Giants. The Sweet Smell of Success, a devastating 1957 depiction of the wicked wranglings of Broadway life, had a powerfully atmospheric score by the Chico Hamilton Quintet, who also played real-life musicians.

Then came Henry Mancini's trenchant sound for the TV series Peter Gunn, a jazz-loving private eye. In its wake came John Cassavetes's shamus Johnny Staccato, a low-budget series that spawned the 1959 opus Shadows, a story of interracial romance featuring music by the great bassist-composer Charles Mingus. (Shadows is beyond doubt my favourite jazz film, as prescient now as then.)

In 1958, Miles Davis created the first-ever improvised film score, for Louis Malle's thriller Ascenseur pour l'échafaud (Elevator to the Gallows), starring Jeanne Moreau. A year later Duke Ellington, 60, wrote his first major film score, for Otto Preminger's Anatomy of a Murder, winning three Grammy Awards.

That year Robert Wise directed Odds Against Tomorrow, an interracial heist film (starring Harry Belafonte) with impeccable music by the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Jazz fans waited with bated breath for jazz-fan Clint Eastwood's 1988 biopic Bird, a celebration of Charlie Parker, co-inventor of bebop, the music's lingua franca, who in his lifetime was filmed in performance but once. "This is a world," wrote Roger Ebert, "where breakfast is a meal held in the late afternoon, where hotel rooms are home, where work is play, and everything else is work."

And prodigious amounts of drugs. The young Miles Davis travelled to New York in 1945 to catch up to Parker, who introduced him to heroin. The circle is completed by that opening scene of the dissolute trumpeter in Miles Ahead. This week Cheadle told the BBC, "If you had him on the couch today, he might be diagnosed as being bipolar, or something of that nature. But it also is the spring from whence all this incredible work happens."

That statement, like the film, shortchanges Davis's genius.

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Don Cheadle plays Miles Davis in a scene from Miles Ahead. BRIAN DOUGLAS/SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

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Passion and some of that jazz

Cheadle crackles with charisma in otherwise pat biopic

MILES AHEAD
★ ★ ★ out of 5
Starring: Don Cheadle, Ewan McGregor
Director: Don Cheadle
Duration: 100 minutes

DAVID BERRY

Musician biopics are possibly the most actor-y of films. So much depends just on matching the charisma of our musical icons that most of them rely on little else.

I Saw the Light uses Tom Hiddleston's solidly rooted take on Hank Williams to just meander through the peaks and valleys of the country star's life. It's less a movie than a series of re-created scenes, which would probably be more damnable if it weren't the standard approach to these things.

Don Cheadle's vanity project Miles Davis biopic — besides playing the man himself, Cheadle wrote and directed — at least has the courtesy of trying to match some of the restlessness and verve of its subject. More an interpretation of Davis's life than telling of it, it follows the jazz man during one of his rare creative lacunas: the late '70s, where the blow is more likely to be in powdered form than on a trumpet, and Miles is faced with being more a legend than an artist, despite the fact that he muddles on.

The imagination comes in what happens: This is basically a chase movie, with Miles and a shady reporter (Ewan McGregor) eager to write his comeback story racing to recover the tape of his latest album, lest that dastardly record company try to go and release it.

Pock-marked with car chases and gunfights — sometimes at the same time — it seems to want to suggest Davis is passionate enough about his artistic vision to do anything to keep it pure. The conceit is both overstated and not really that sharp an analogy, but Cheadle the director and screenwriter is at least sharp enough to keep the camera kinetic and give us enough breath to meditate with him on a master.

When he isn't rushing around New York looking for drugs or shady promoters, Miles here is a broken thing, twisted by regret at lost love and haunted by his future self, the only Miles Davis anyone seems to see. His reluctance to release anything seems to stem from his inability to live up to his past self, whether that means a man who might truly love somebody else or just a musician whose next album was eagerly anticipated, as opposed to a dutiful bow on a retirement tour.

Everywhere he goes, he is reminded of what he was — captured maybe too succinctly in the recurring image of the album Someday My Prince Will Come, which features his wife Francis on the cover. And now he can't quite figure out what he is now, other than a guy who wants another bump and to be left alone.

Purpose comes in the form of getting the tapes back after a young musician lifts them during a party, Davis spurred on by the journalist who is eager to see some of the old Miles in the new. It's all a little too pat, though, reducing Davis rather than expanding on him, simplifying him to a driving impulse.

Credit where it's due, though: Cheadle at least keeps him crackling with charisma from couch to car seat. Leave it to an actor to make himself a great role.

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